

Now and Forever

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On the way back to Vermilion City, Ash and Goh find themselves going through the very same path Ash started his journey in near Pallet Town. As nostalgia leads to a trip down memory lane, the pair addresses an inevitable part of their adventuring. [One-shot in celebration of the Anime's 25th anniversary; set during Journeys]

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The slow steps on the soft ground were a familiar music to Ash's ears. Having traveled several regions mostly on foot had acquainted him to long walks, something Goh was only slowly starting to appreciate. Their partners Pikachu and Grookey stood on their shoulders as the two boys were making their way back from Pallet Town, headed to Viridian City so they could catch the first bus back to Vermilion City, ready to return to their routine as research fellows for Professor Cerise.

But at the time, neither of the two trainers was thinking much about their destination. Ash, in particular, was basking in the atmosphere of the path around them. For most other trainers it would've been nothing but one tract of land among many, but for the trainer from Pallet and his loyal Electric-type it held a special, unforgettable meaning.

"So this is where you and Pikachu started your adventure?" Goh asked, distracting himself from the lazy swiping of his Rotom Phone's apps and looking back at his companion.

"Yeah, it is!" Ash gave him an energetic nod, memories of that day flooding his mind. He shared a glance at his starter Pokémon, finding his grin back at him. "It feels like so long ago now, doesn't it, buddy?"

"Pi, Pikapi!" the Mouse Pokémon chirped, rising a paw in acknowledgement. It wasn't what either of them would've called a *pleasant* experience, but after braving much more dangerous situations, dealing with a flock of ornery Spearow that wanted them gone felt like nothing more than the stepping stone of their friendship.

Goh smiled, his curiosity increasing as he scratched Grookey's head. "And that's also when you saw Ho-Oh, right?"

"Mhm. It was my first time seeing a Pokémon like that, something new that I never saw before. It kinda opened the door to our adventures."

Goh's smile only increased, no doubt finding the claim familiar. Ash didn't need any reply to know what Goh was thinking; he was aware of how much his friend's encounter with Mew mirrored his own with Ho-Oh, and for as much differences they had, their shared love for Pokémon and the wide world they inhabited was one of their strongest commonalities.

Instead, Ash chuckled out, enjoying the flow of memories as he glimpsed the nearby river and the patch of greenery they were leaving behind. "You should've seen how things were back then. Pikachu really didn't want to listen to me, and I just kept getting mad at him."

Pikachu sent him a half-lidded and embarrassed stare at the brought up memory, something that led Goh to quirk an eyebrow, shifting between his friend and the Electric-type with a puzzled glance. "I really can't imagine that."

"Things weren't always like they are now," Ash's gaze turned sheepish, remembering quite clearly how he acted back then. "Back when I started out, my one thought was to one-up Gary and prove him and the world I was the better trainer."

"Seeing as he's a total jerk, I don't blame you."

Goh's sneering at Gary's mention almost caught Ash by surprise, his friend clearly still not over their sour first meeting. The aspiring Pokémon Master chuckled out a bit.

"Hey, now, he's not so bad once you get past first impressions." Goh was hardly convinced as he rolled his eyes, but Ash didn't let it stop him, looking back at his closed palm. "It took me a while to realize it. And I had to learn quite a few lessons along the way to become a good trainer."

"Pika pikachu pi," said Pikachu with a sagely nod.

His friend's remark was met with a scowl. "You aren't supposed to point that out, you know."

Pikachu giggled back, almost looking proud of it. But it was all in good faith, and they both let it go past without much bad blood.

What wasn't let past, however, was Goh's puzzled glance at the ongoing wistfulness. "You sure are chatty about the past today. Usually you are a mystery box that just mentions things when it's relevant."

"I'm as mysterious as a Pokémon Egg, aren't I?" Ash replied, the in-joke earning him a laugh from his friend.

"Touché."

"But really, I just try to keep my eyes on the present and what's to come rather than look back, you know? There's always a new adventure ahead to think about."

"I'm not sure I can say that. Your past is always going to be with you, whether you like it or not." Goh turned away from Ash, towards the distant silhouettes of Viridian City's buildings, yet looking further away than that.

Ash shook his head. "I'm not saying it isn't. I do think of the past as well, sometimes."

"What about?" Goh's attention returned back to him, shoving his phone in the front pocket of his shirt. "You always sound like you had the craziest sort of life before we met. And we've squared off against legends and saved the Galar region!"

"Oh, I did that at least three times every regional journey."

Goh's face lost all colors and he stared at Ash like he was even more of an alien than usual. Whether that was because of Ash's casual

shrug or the information given, he didn't know. The boy from Pallet didn't dwell on his friend's reaction much, however, instead glancing upwards once more. "But if there's something I go back to often... it's the friends I've met in my journeys. From Kanto, the Orange Islands, Johto, Hoenn, Sinnoh, Unova, the Decolore Islands, Kalos, Alola and even Galar now. Whether they're people I met once or old travel buddies, every encounter was precious to me."

"You make it sound like you could fill all of Wyndon Stadium just with the people you know..."

"Maybe they could. I kind of lost count." He chuckled out, a sheepish grin over his face. "I'd be happy if they're still watching my matches from time to time."

"You don't keep in touch?"

"Sometimes I do, most times I can't." With a nonchalant shrug, Ash eyed back his friend. "Most of my friends are all over the place, doing all kinds of things. Gym Leaders, Pokémon Watchers, Pokémon Doctors, Coordinators, Dragon Masters, Connoisseurs, Performers, inventors, students, future Trainers... and that's just a few of them!"

Thinking back to all of their friends, from Misty and Brock to their classmates from Alola, Ash and Pikachu couldn't help but smile more. Ever since they set off, it had been one adventure after the other with little rest in between, but he wouldn't have traded any of them for anything in the world.

He found Goh staring back at him, his gaze firm. "So I'm just the latest of your many friends for you."

"Of course! I'm glad to know you!"

Ash spoke honestly, as he always did. They may have only known each other for a short while, after their little adventure chasing Lugia,

but the aspiring Pokémon Master knew their bond was as strong as the one he shared with all of his prior companions.

And that was why he was confused, seeing Goh's face morph into a frown, staring inquisitive daggers back at him. He tried to ask why, but Goh was faster.

"So, one day, we're also gonna separate and just... never see each other again?" There was anger in the Vermilion boy's tone, now a hairbreadth away from Ash's face.

"I dunno, I can't see the future," was Ash's simple answer, his voice betraying some unease. On their shoulders, Pikachu and Grookey appeared similarly concerned.

It was not what Goh wanted to hear.

"Is that really all you have to say?" The other boy's lip quivered, his fists balled tight. "That one day you'll just... be gone?"

He stood there, standing firm but on shaky legs, holding his stare towards Ash. And at that point, the boy from Pallet understood.

Goh's own journey had just begun. He hadn't yet grown used to the inevitable partings along the way, even with people one would think would be your eternal friends. It was a place Ash had been before, as well.

"I don't know about you, but for me, you'll never be gone." Ash spoke from learned experience, smiling back at Goh. "I'll treasure each and every adventure we shared, no matter where I'll go next."

"And you think just *knowing* that should make me feel better?" Goh's shoulders slumped down, his true vulnerability on display. "You're one of my best friends. If you were gone, I..."

Ash couldn't blame him. It was a harsh prospect, one he had problems dealing with as well. And he knew how hard Goh could

take all of that. And so Ash smiled again, placing his hands over Goh's shoulders, grappling him firmly but gently.

"You'd still have Professor Cerise, and Chloe, and Ren and Chrysa and everyone else we meet on our journey." Ash placed a hand over his own heart, his smile growing warmer. "And you'll always have me, right there."

Goh averted his gaze. "But our journey would be over."

"It'll become my journey, and your journey. But the part that was *our* journey, the bonds we shared there, will never stop being important." Ash didn't let go, continuing to hold his stare. "You say I helped you see the whole world, but part of you always wanted to see it, right?"

He could feel Goh quaking in front of him, continuing to look the other way. And yet, his frown cracked, gravitating back towards Ash and locking gazes once more. "I just wanted to find Mew again."

"And I just wanted to become a Pokémon Master," Ash chuckled out. "The adventure was a nice bonus at first, but now I couldn't live without it."

It was a weird feeling, looking back to it. He could pinpoint to several important meetings on his long journey, and yet he felt like he was both the same Ash Ketchum from Pallet Town and someone much different than when he started at . *When one life meets another something will be born*, Cynthia used to say. And he and Goh had both met several lives, with many more still to be seen. Each just one step of their never-ending quests.

Ash held his gaze still, trusting in his feelings to carry through to his friend. Goh's own gaze felt clearer, the uncertainty not quite gone from his eyes, yet his smile cracked through it.

"Heh." Goh's face lit up again, a sheepish expression on as he rubbed his neck. "I can't put it into words, but... I get it."

Ash patted his shoulder with gusto. "You'll get there. And I think you're on a good track!"

Together, Ash and Goh finally shared a laugh, soon joined by both Pikachu and Grookey. The weight of the prior moment seemed so long ago, the doubts seemingly cast away from Goh's mind. Ash wasn't sure if it truly solved the issue, but he trusted his friend would not crack like that anymore. Goh was stronger than he believed, after all.

"For all your weird quirks, you sure are a good mentor," Goh mentioned with a further chuckle to himself.

"I'm not your mentor. We're partners!" Ash slung his arm across Goh's shoulder, tackling him closer. "I was just telling you things you already know."

"If you say that..." Goh sounded anything but convinced, but his cheer didn't falter. He turned forward once more, towards the buildings in the distance. "So... we're just gonna have to continue onward, and see what the future has in store for us?"

"Of course!" Ash freed Goh from his grasp, giving him a thumbs up. "We may not always be together in person, but we'll always be together in spirit, now and forever."

Goh acknowledged him with a nod, getting ready for a sprint forward. "It's on, then. Vermilion City, here we come!"

And so, both boys and their Pokémon raced forward, with no doubts and worries lingering in their mind as they headed for what was to come. Whether it was the World Coronation Series, Project Mew, or any sort of adventure, they both knew that they could make it, companions until the very end.

Together.

Happy twenty-fifth anniversary to the Pokémon Anime, everyone!

This was a bit of a departure compared to my usual personal writing, as while I had a chance to write a bit of Goh before this is my first time making a one-shot fully set within Journeys's timeframe. I felt it was appropriate for a small semi-retrospective semi-dialogue on the consistent and inevitable changeups of this show as a way to celebrate such an important milestone, and writing the Ash and Goh dynamic was quite enjoyable. In case anyone is interested in the specific timeframe this story is set in, this is set right after episode 69 of Journeys, "Advice to Goh!" in the dub, while Ash and Goh are heading back to Cerise Laboratory the day after their adventure involving Moltres, Gary and the introduction of Project Mew, since I felt it was the most natural way to have Ash and Goh tread the path the former started his Pokémon journey in.

I was initially meaning to post it on April 1st, but one thing led to another and it took longer than I expected to complete and polish it up to a shine. I thank PurimPopoie for her help in betaing this little story ahead of posting, and hope it entertained you.

There's quite a bit I'm preparing for the future as of current, and there's a good chance this story may end up as a sort of dry run for an upcoming project of mine. It may take some time until it's ready to be unveiled, but in the meantime I hope my writing can keep being enjoyable, and that you'll keep looking forward to what's to come!